

DOUGLAS, a Tragedy, ^{ny}
1490.C.96

Weighed in the Balances, and
found wanting.

B E I N G

An ANSWER to two important QUE-
STIONS respecting that performance.

In a LETTER from a Gentleman to his friend.

*When churchmen scripture for the classics quit,
Polite apostates from God's grace to wit.*

Young's Univ. Pass. sat. 1.

E D I N B U R G H :

Printed for W. GRAY and W. PETER. 1757.

Price Six Pence.

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Young's Univ. Hall, Jan. 1.

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S I R,

IN compliance with your desire, I shall give you my thoughts on the late strange phænomenon of *Douglas*; and shall do it as corresponding with one who admits of revelation as the only uncontested source of resolution, in matters of difficulty.

What you desire I imagine will be summed up in two questions. 1. In the event that a minister of the church of Scotland shall, according to common fame, appear to have composed a tragedy, and introduced it to the stage; how is such conduct consistent with his character and duty as a minister of the gospel?

2. Whether, on the supposition that plays having a good tendency were in themselves lawful and praise-worthy, the tragedy of *Douglas* is, upon scriptural principles, a performance of that kind?

Taking these, Sir, to be the substance of your present difficulties, I shall, with all chearfulness, contribute my endeavours to resolve them; leaving you to compare what shall be offered with the unerring standard of faith and practice, and to act with respect to the tragedy and tragedian accordingly.

As to the first of your inquiries: Though the author of that dramatic performance continues, how far I have learned, still behind the scene, without publicly acknowledging the *thing* to be his offspring*; yet there are different persons, in different corners, bearing the name of gospel-ministers, who have, and some of them with profession of repentance, judicially owned their having countenanced the stage in

* Mr John Home, minister of Athelstonford, has acknowledged to his presbytery that he is the author.

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witnessing that particular representation. With respect to these I have two things to remark previous to the direct answer of your first question.

The gentlemen now under view are either such as have not, or actually have, acknowledged their witnessing a dramatic representation on the stage to have been wrong.

Such minister or ministers as belong to the former class, I imagine, are much on a level with the author himself, whether praise or blame worthy; and therefore the consistency of that piece of their conduct with the sacred character they sustain, will be considered in the sequel of this argument. Only I must be permitted to observe, that whether the author be to be commended or condemned, the commendation or condemnation of such brethren must arise above that, even of the author, in proportion to the temptations they or he may be supposed to have been influenced by. If a virtuous praise-worthy action in the author, who had the prospect of profit and applause; it was much more so in the abettors, who had no reason to hope for reward. But if the author's conduct shall appear ridiculous and sinful, their sin and folly must have been much higher in degree and aggravation, as they had not the same temptation of gain in abetting, that he had, or might have, in composing and publishing the poem.

The ministers, on the other hand, who have acknowledged their witnessing a dramatic representation on the stage to have been wrong, if not in itself, yet because of the consequence, have expressed their penitence and regret for giving offence; and, as the genuine concomitant of repentance, declared their resolution against any future repetition of such conduct.

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These ministers, in having done so, furnish with an argument, though not conclusive, yet in itself of importance, against the author and his faithful abettors both.

The argument is not conclusive, because persons of weak narrow minds may sometimes view an action, altogether inoffensive in its own nature, and in its most obvious and certain tendency, in such a peculiar point of light as shall occasion distress of mind to themselves, and extort expressions of sorrow and regret from them. Some particular persons may be thus exercised, while the far greater number of equal virtue and value may have the greatest peace upon a minute survey of the same very action. To apply this to our present purpose, it may be alledged, that though one of the *fairest*, and another of the *firmest* characters, have appeared at the bar of their superiors in the humble quality of penitents for their rashly countenancing the stage in the instance under view; yet another, of a *sturdier* soul, and possessed of more *intrepid* courage, has, in the same judicial manner, expressed his entire peace of mind, notwithstanding the same conduct; nor only expressed his peace of mind, but such confidence of the thing having been noble and dutiful, that he has submitted to the risk of a formal trial, however fatal the issue to his outward circumstances may prove.

But though the argument hinted is not conclusive, I apprehend there is more strength in it than to every person at first sight may appear. If the gentlemen who have made such acknowledgment of an error in practice, were known to be men of scrupulous cloudy consciences in other things, their having acted such a part might have been viewed without much prejudice to *their* characters differing from them;

but as none of their intimate acquaintance can justly brand them with a weakness of this sort, it is presumed their late conduct appeared in a more than ordinary hateful light; else it is impossible to imagine, without impeaching them with the highest crimes, they would ever have stood in the capacity of penitents at the bar of their respective presbyteries.

I am sensible the different procedure of two very numerous presbyteries will be considered by some as quite subversive of any strength that seemed otherwise to have been in this argument: that while one of them laid their unhappy brother under a very considerable censure, the other did not so much as allow the acknowledgment of their accused member a place in their records. But the force of this objection will subside, if it is only considered, that the conduct of the latter flowed from such a striking view of their brother's fault, that, if my information does not misguide me, they were afraid, lest, by ingrossing his acknowledgment in their minutes, the offence his attendance on the stage had given might spread, and of consequence the success of his ministry be *more* marred.

By this time, Sir, you will guess to what my sentiments on this subject will amount; and therefore, without further preliminary, I shall proceed to a scriptural resolution of your difficulties, and shall study all brevity in it.

In answer then to your first proposition, I would in general recommend to your perusal Mr Wither-
spoon's late inquiry into the nature and effects of the stage; wherein the unfitness and impropriety of that entertainment for Christians is considered with justness of sentiment and strength of reasoning: and
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what I am now to suggest on that head, you may take as a supplement to his more masterly performance.

If the tragedy to which our present correspondence has a respect, was composed and introduced to the stage by a minister of the gospel, the consistency or inconsistency of his conduct will appear, from comparing it with the character and duty of gospel-ministers, in the following and such like particulars.

First of all, then, it is laid down as an apostolical maxim, That gospel-ministers spend their time, and employ their talents in improving what ministerial gifts they are endued with, so as to be thence the more qualified for the actual discharge of that solemn and important trust. The study of what is essentially necessary toward their usefulness in the gospel of our salvation, must be no by-work, but their leading principal business, to which every amusement and recreation should be wholly subservient. This is represented, with peculiar elegance and beauty, by the apostle, when he exhorted Timothy, and in him all after ministers of Christ, not only to guard against a criminal "neglect of the gift that was in him, and to meditate upon these things; but to give himself wholly to them." Nor will it bear dispute, that the things to which Paul called Timothy to give himself wholly, were "the things which pertain to the kingdom of God," if his own determination as a Christian, and teacher of Christianity, is but just observed, "to know nothing among the churches, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Besides, in a second letter to his said son in the gospel, he evidently explains himself in this light, *Continue thou, said he, in the things which thou hast learned, and hast been assured of, knowing of whom*

whom thou hast learned them: and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures: An undoubted intimation, that the scriptures are to be the constant study of Christian ministers; and that, in whatever other studies they employ themselves, they may have it in their eye, to be thereby more capable of understanding the holy oracles, and of “bringing out of these treasures things new and old.”

That the composition of tragedy for the stage is not comprehended in the things to which the ministers of Christ are to consecrate their study and labours, will appear from these two considerations.

First, That such compositions have no foundation in the scriptures. The scriptures are not the plan by which they are formed, the rule by which they are directed, nor the subject about which they are usually conversant. A fable, a romance, an obsolete song, or at best a piece of profane history, is generally the theme. Nor would these, without the art and embellishment of the dramatist, entertain or improve, the most sanguine advocates for the stage being judges. So that compositions of this sort necessarily suppose the author a student of fables, instead of realities; and of Heathen, instead of inspired writings: than which, in my apprehension, nothing can be more out of character, in one clothed with the sacred, the honourable function. And then,

That the end proposed by the apostle to Christian ministers, of their “giving themselves wholly to these things,” can never be answered by the composition of dramatic poems, whether comical or tragical. They are called thus to employ themselves, “that their profiting may appear to all;” that their improvements in divine knowledge, in conformity to the scriptures, and in fittedness for the work
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of the ministry, may appear by their ministerial labours, public or private, to be afterwards mentioned. But it is impossible, that one can reasonably propose to reach this end, by a composition to which the study of the scriptures has no relation. By compositions of that kind, men may indeed acquire different embellishments: but as “the speech and preaching of gospel-ministers should not be with enticing words of man’s wisdom;” that is a profiting of no further importance, than as it is accompanied with proportional improvements of a solid, divine, and edifying nature.

Secondly, The ministers of the gospel are not only bound to employ their thoughts, and direct their studies toward preparation for usefulness in the church of Christ; but actually to reduce these thoughts, studies, and preparations to practice;—in the language of inspiration, “to preach the word; to be instant in season, out of season; to reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine;—to watch in all things, to do the work of an evangelist, and to make full proof of their ministry.”

For my own part, dear Sir, I cannot see how it is possible for one, with any degree of success or comfort, to acquit himself in the discharge of the ministry, whose principal studies have a respect to preparations for the stage. Nor can his diligence and application in the dramatic way, do otherwise than rob the great Shepherd of a part of that service he requires, and deserves of all employed in the work of the gospel. So that, unless you could imagine the person capable of attending the stage and pulpit at once, of playing and preaching in the same instant, he cannot, on the apostle’s principles, be said to practise, and suitably to “fulfil the ministry he
“ has

“ has received of the Lord Jesus.” When all the particulars of a minister’s work now mentioned from the apostle, are surveyed and examined, it will not appear, that, in composing, exhibiting, or publishing theatrical representations, any part of it is fulfilled. If they are to act in a public capacity, *preaching*, and not playing, or furnishing with materials for it, is their duty. If they are to *reprove*, *rebuke*, and *exhort*, these must be done with doctrine, or according to the doctrines of the holy scriptures, and not with dramatic representations, which, at the very best, are but “the commandments of men.” If they are enjoined to *watch*, they must watch in *all things*, taking every opportunity of guarding against every infection, through which their labours in the gospel may be frustrated. If they are to administer consolation to bleeding hearts, they must do it, not by fanciful representations from the stage, but by the grounds of encouragement laid up in the treasures of the word, which the apostle calls *doing the work of an evangelist*, or of one who brings good news. And if they are by their performances to make full proof of their gifts and talents, it must not be in the dramatic, but in the evangelic way. They are “to make full proof,” of what? of their poetical genius?—of their talents for dramatic compositions?—of their acquaintance with such learning, ancient or modern, as is connected with the business of the stage? By no means, Sir. They are “to make full proof of their ministry;” and that, doubtless, by the faithful, conscientious, constant discharge of it. And if compositions for the stage are no part of a minister’s work;—in furnishing and encouraging it, he at least neglects a part of his duty, and squanders a share of his talents as a servant of Christ. If
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the apostles, whose steps gospel-ministers should be ambitious of treading, counted it "unreasonable" that they should leave the word of God, even to "serve tables;" it is surprising how it could ever enter into one's head, that as a minister he might leave the word of God for the purposes of the stage. Nor will it apologise for such a person, though he should alledge, that no part of his ordinary work as a minister was ever neglected by his theatrical studies; because, as his whole studies and endeavours should point one and the same way, namely, toward the honour of his Master, the credit of the gospel, and the salvation of souls; his studies in the dramatic style are quite misapplied; and thence, in the same proportion, his Master is dishonoured, the gospel neglected, and the interest of souls overlooked. Has he leisure for these compositions, beside the performance of his ordinary work as a minister? then, laying aside these, he might do much more in his sacred ministerial capacity.

Thirdly, I find, that, by the apostle, ministers of the gospel are enjoined to exhibit a particular watchfulness, concern, and care, about those more immediately committed to their trust. And if I am not misinformed, ministers of this church lay themselves, at the imposition of hands, under a promissory oath to that effect. The apostle's words are strong and significant, *Take heed therefore*, said he to the elders at Ephesus, *unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.* And the Hebrews are enjoined by the apostle, in a manner that is still more expressive of this branch of the minister's character and office, *Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves;*

for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account; that they may do it with joy, and not with grief.

From the different branches of their relational duties, as having the pastoral charge of particular flocks, it will at once appear how much one or other, or more of these duties, must be neglected by such ministers of the gospel as employ themselves in the service of the stage. If a flock, they must be constantly tended, lest unforeseen dangers creep in among them; which their pastor's presence might, under the great Shepherd, have prevented. But how, pray how can a minister give such attendance on his flock, when the publishing or exhibiting his dramatic performances may, nay must, lay him under a sinful necessity of absenting himself from them for weeks or months, perhaps several months all at once? What neglect of duty, what commission of sin, what introduction of error, what wandering to the right or left hand, may amongst his flock take place in such interval? This seems to have been particularly in the apostle's view when he exhorted the elders of Ephesus as above; for he immediately adds, that, "after his departure, he knew grievous wolves " would enter in among them, not sparing the " flock."

If a flock, they are to be *fed* as well as tended, and fed, in the apostle's language, with "whole-
" some words, even the words of our Lord Jesus
" Christ, and with the doctrine which is according
" to godliness. The unskilful in the word of righ-
" teousness is to be fed with milk, for he is a babe;" or, in other words, is to be "taught the first prin-
" ciples of the oracles of God; and they that are
" of full age, are to be fed with strong meat." This
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being the case, with what propriety can such pastors be said to feed their flocks in that manner, who waste the time in which, by prayer, and the study of the scriptures, they should be providing for them, in a study which is altogether foreign to scriptural saving edification and improvement. Besides, in the very nature of the thing, the means of their people's instruction must be thence either laid aside at times, or else performed in such a vague indifferent way, as promise little, if any success at all. If the most faithful servants of Jesus Christ find, that after all the pains and labour they are capable of, when their whole time, talents, and opportunities are consecrated to the work of the gospel, they are unprofitable servants; with what countenance can men hope to reach the ends of a gospel-ministry, where pursuits of a dramatic kind worry up the most and best of their time, and of consequence the dregs of it only are allowed for their ministerial work? This, if I mistake not, is an offering up of "a corrupt thing" to the Lord, while they have a male in their "flock." But if the prosecution of these theatrical schemes makes their absence from their flocks necessary, how are they fed in that case? by whom is the milk or strong meat dispensed? how are the fatherless and the widow visited in their distress? by what means are the sick and dying directed, instructed, encouraged?

Further, it is not merely a part of their flocks that ministers are bound to feed, but *all* of them, according to the apostle's divine instruction. If ministers had the charge of none but the gay, the youthful, the learned and polite, it might be argued, that to such, being persons of taste, dramatic performances might afford more real entertainment, more

sensible pleasure, than any compositions or performances upon the topics of Christianity; and that therefore such studies imply nothing beyond the apostle's own practice of *becoming all things to all men*. But have they not an equal charge of the weak, the ignorant, the unlearned? are not the souls of such equally intrusted with them? and are they not thence by the same ties bound to feed the latter as well as the former? But who will pretend, that an obscure peasant can either be entertained or edified by the poet's art, or stroller's action? Who will affirm, that dramatic elegance and beauty shall appear to a mind altogether rustic and uncultivated? And if the excellency of the poem, though it were never so much calculated to edification and improvement, is not discovered, can it be any thing better than a sealed book, or a strange language, to such persons? In condescending to the capacity of the meanest, preachers of the gospel will be fully understood by those of the greatest reach; whereas, endeavouring to please the latter, the edification of the former is totally abortive. Wherefore the prosecution of dramatic learning will not comport with that part of the pastor's duty to feed *all* his flock.

Moreover, in this branch of the ministerial character, the accountableness of pastors for their flocks is evidently supposed. But if ministers indulge themselves in studies and pursuits different from those with which the salvation of their people is connected, it argues a peculiar degree of unbelief as to their future reckoning with Jesus Christ, and searedness of conscience with respect to the consequence of that trial; than which nothing can be more inconsistent with the true spirit and genuine fruits of Christianity.

In fine, if all this has place, in violation of their
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solemn ordination-vows, it is expressive of wilful and habitual perjury itself: A crime too shocking to be supposed in the Christian character, absolutely intolerable in those who are by profession teachers of Christianity.

Should the votaries of the stage alledge in their own vindication, That there are numberless ways in which ministers may do injustice to their flocks, and be unfaithful to their trust, though they nor compose dramatic poems, nor be capable of it; the answer is short, That two blacks will never make a white. One error in one person can never justify a different error in another. This reasoning has no more argument in it, than if one should excuse his squandering his substance and time in the tavern, because another does it at the card, and other gaming tables.

Fourthly, In the New Testament, I find, that pastors are obliged to be patterns to their people; to lead such lives, to have such conversations, as their flocks ought to follow; to set them examples of all the virtues, graces, and duties they are bound to practise; and that both in a negative and positive regard, in a personal and relational capacity: "To be examples of believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity: To shew themselves patterns of good works; in all things to approve themselves as the ministers of God; by pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left."

But how the advocates for the stage will reconcile the composition and promoting of tragical representations

tations in ministers of the gospel with these apostolical injunctions, I cannot easily conceive. To me, Sir, such practice is no less remote from such character, than east is from west; no less repugnant unto and subversive of each other *these*, than *plus* and *minus* in the characters of algebra. As the latter, so do the former quite annihilate and destroy each other. This contrast, however, will appear more particularly, if the following things, expressed or implied in the foregoing quotations, are adverted unto.

1st, That in an exemplary character, upon Christian principles, there must be a superior love of the word; and this must be discovered by the diligent study of it, in order to a growing conformity to it. I take it to be one great end of a gospel-ministry, and therefore a very considerable part of a minister's business and duty, to lead those with whom they stand more or less immediately connected, to the search and improvement of the scriptures. If they do so in a doctrinal way, it is so far well; in that their conduct is amiable and praise-worthy; and by that, to those who know them only in their pulpit-capacity, they may be useful, their ministry may be blessed. But is the probability of their usefulness and success the same with regard to such of their flock as have the best reason to know they make no conscience of the study of scripture-knowledge themselves? By no means: and therefore, unless they be previously in love with the word of truth, the example of such unhappy, I had almost said wretched, pastors, will lead them to consider the scriptures as cunningly-devised fables, or at best a study greatly below the better and more sensible part of mankind; will lead them to think there is more true divinity in the writings of Plato than Moses, more real instruction

tion in the characters of Greece and Rome than in those of the prophets and apostles; and will greatly contribute to persuade, that men may act to the divine approbation in the habitual neglect, the practical contempt of those very oracles, by which alone the way of serving and pleasing God can be perfectly discovered.

2dly, That in such a character there must be a holy deniedness to the world, whether the smiles, the profits, or pleasures of it: these, as idols of jealousy, must be thrown to the moles and bats; and the rather in an exemplary character, that men are generally so apt to be allured by them, and as grins and snares taken in them. But will any pretend to say, that dramatic studies and pursuits are expressive of such a temper of mind? They might, with equal propriety, call evil good, and good evil. The smiles and approbation of the churches could never influence them; since the united testimony of all who have any just title to be counted of the churches of Christ, is in plainest opposition to them. Contempt of worldly gain, so beautifully expressed in the most evangelical characters, could not be their motive; seeing the direct tendency of publishing and exhibiting dramatic poems, is to amass gain, and better their outward circumstances. Nor can it possibly be imagined, that such performances are the fruit of being mortified to worldly pleasures; since their *boasted* tendency is not merely to *instruct*, but to *divert and please*. Now, pray, with what confidence can the Levitical dramatist recommend and injoin the prosecution of these divine virtues to others, so shamefully and sinfully overlooked by himself? or, if such Pharisaical impudence of face is acquired, with what success in such exhortations has he reason

to meet? How naturally, how probably may such teachers expect the cutting reply, *Physicians, cure yourselves?*

3dly, In such a character there must be a divine thirst and endeavour after holiness in heart and life. This, as rendering them conform to the image of God, must not only be their ambition, but the very top of it. And unless it can be made appear, that the study of fable, the prosecution of folly, the representation of profaneness and vice, are conducive toward this noble end, the practice under view will by no means comport with the character requisite in the teachers of Christianity. In order to the attainment of true holiness, what are the means, in dependence on grace, to be used? Are men to devote their time to the study of romance? are they to prosecute the foibles of ancient Heathens? must they put a religious honour upon the stage? and encourage, by their pen, their purse, and presence, that ancient seminary of idleness and lust? Then, Sir, our dramatical clergy act in character, their example is a living system of important instruction. But if prayer, secret and social; if gospel-ordinances, private and public; if reading, meditation, and conference on the topics peculiar to the Christian religion, are the appointed means of acquiring holiness, and improving in it; can any man possessed of reason in the lowest degree be at a loss to determine, as to such teachers, that they nor prosecute holiness, nor encourage others to do so?

4thly, In such a character, there must be a charitable yielding unto the weak, and bearing with them in as far as duty and conscience will permit. Now, though, for once, we should allow, that all who consider the encouragement of the stage in an unfavourable

yourable point of light, were in fact weak and silly souls; how do the composers and promoters of dramatic representations instruct their regard to that branch of an exemplary character? Either they must pretend ignorance of the stage being a ground of offence to particular persons, whom they will not be so hardy as to unchristian; or else they must alledge the support of the stage to be a duty so necessary and important, that they cannot, without sinning, withhold their assistance. But as none of these can be the case, the conduct of such teachers is highly blame-worthy.

sibly, In such a character, there must be an uniform regard to relational duties, or those incumbent on Christians with regard to others connected with them, by whatever tie. Without this, it is impossible to evince the truth of one's religion; since, of every thing else, Christianity has the directest tendency to make its votaries better, sovereigns or subjects, masters or servants, teachers or scholars, parents or children, and the like. But, not to mention how the promotion of the stage in this land preys more or less upon their duty in other relative regards, the authors and abettors, the friends and supporters of the stage in Scotland, pour contempt on the plainest statute, and tread deliberately on the justest law. Than which we know nothing more dangerous in a civil view, nor more conducive toward the infusion of rebellious principles, and the execution of seditious schemes. For if those who should be patterns of regard to lawful authority despise it in one article, how ready are others to imagine they may disregard it in another, until, from less or more, the flame break out, that much blood and much treasure cannot quench?

6thly, In such a character there must be an equal regard to statinal as relational duties. Abiding in their respective callings is highly incumbent on the followers of Christ. But until it is proved, that the encouragement of the stage belongs to the ministerial office and function; in dramatic preparations and performances, ministers of the gospel make an obvious digression from that calling, and consequently pave the way, by their example, for repeated disorders and inconveniencies amongst those under their inspection. If ministers leave the study of the gospel for that of plays, leave the cure of souls, in order to acquire a name among the heroes of the stage; will not others take encouragement from thence, to neglect the proper business of their stations, and lose their time in forming and prosecuting schemes comparatively fruitless and ignoble? Should the physician turn cobbler, the lawyer tailor, or the gallant warrior spend his strength in knight-errantry itself; or, on the other hand, if the illiterate and obscure should take it into their heads to profess and practise in things quite above their reach, beyond their sphere of knowledge;—as is the case with most of our lay preachers, quack doctors, borowstown lawyers, teatable politicians, and the like fertile sources of error, disease, strife, and distraction;—or, finally, should men of equal parts and learning, by an unreasonable change of procedure, forsake one business they are qualified for, to prosecute another to which they are strangers;—as if one accustomed to the bar should betake himself to the pulpit; another practised in the pulse should repair to the bench; or as if a third should, after great experience in the field, apply himself to the business of the cabinet:—in a word, if the merchant should follow the plough, the farmer

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steer the helm, or the mechanic sit down behind the counter : — there would be nothing more intolerable in either of these, than in any of the sons of Levi degenerating into the employment and society of dramatists and strollers. With the same propriety might such teachers of religion turn tinkers, tumblers, rope-dancers, or any thing else, an equal burden and nuisance to society.

7thly, In such a character, a holy caution, and divine sagacity, in the choice of company and conversation, must be exercised ; because, as evil communication has a corrupting influence on the manners of men ; though, by a peculiar strength of mind, they were proof against danger and infection from unprofitable society themselves ; it is by no means to be imagined, that all, whose eyes are upon them, are so armed and guarded. And if ministers make strollers their companions, will it be any surprise to find others, under the influence of their example, making strumpets their confederates ? If ministers discover a value of and complacency in the society of infidels, and immoral persons ; to what length may not those who think themselves safe in observing a strict imitation, to what dreadful lengths may they not go ?

In fine, in an exemplary character, upon New-Testament principles, it is necessary, that all things be done for edification ; that doing honour to God, and good to men, be the leading motive and native tendency of all their deportment, to whatever self-denial, hardships, and dangers, by so doing, they should be exposed. But that the patronage and support of the stage is not for edification, appears in part already, and will be more evident from the sequel. Wherefore I shall, to prevent repetitions, insist no further on this part of the subject.

Thus, Sir, I have endeavoured to answer your first, and shall now proceed to the consideration of your second inquiry,

“WHETHER, on the supposition that plays, having a good tendency, were in themselves lawful and praise-worthy, the tragedy of *Douglas* is, upon scriptural principles, a performance of that kind?”

It is not my purpose to examine that performance as a critic of plays; to consider the justness, propriety, elegance, and beauty of, it as a dramatic poem. Was I to give my judgment in that abstracted light, perhaps it would be entirely favourable. But as it is the moral or immoral nature and tendency of the poem, upon scriptural principles, you seek after, my opinion is at once in opposition to it. After reading it over once, again and again, I am not able to see the smallest probability of its usefulness in the cause of virtue and religion, whether used in the closet, or seen from the stage. On the contrary, it appears to me a most unaccountable medley of impiety, profaneness, error, immorality, and vice. And in proportion to the exactness of the composition, and symmetry of all the parts, I consider it as so much the more dangerous and insnaring, like a dunghill covered over with snow, or a hook hid in the midst of a delicious bait. To give you all my reasons for this opinion of that poem, would make it necessary to transcribe almost every line, that I might squeeze out the lurking venom, in the same order our subtle poet has twisted it up.

In each character through the whole drama, more than enough to disgust every Christian mind, might easily be pointed out.

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It were endless to expatiate on each of them, since the advocates for the stage consider the representation of ignoble characters as a beacon, to guard others from splitting on the same rocks.

On this account, I shall take no notice of Glenalvon's history, as exhibited in that performance, at all: though I imagine it might easily be made appear, that the bare representation of such wickedness has a very different tendency from what the friends of tragedy are willing to think.

Nor is there any thing in the character of Douglas himself that merits particular attention; if it is not what, upon Christian principles, must be to the whole, what the dead fly is in the apothecary's ointment. To what does his virtue amount? what is the sum-total of his excellencies, in a moral view? Will any man make more of it than this, that he was swelled with pride, crammed with self-sufficiency, insatiable in his lust of fame, and inexorable in that of revenge? If these are beauties to be transcribed, if these are originals fit for youth to copy after, if these are amiable and praise-worthy sentiments; it must be by some other standard than that of the scriptures that our poet has taken his dimensions of virtue.

With respect to Lord Randolph, who bears a considerable share in the action and drama; besides his general character, which is more correspondent to the Heathen than Christian system; there are particular distinguishing blemishes in his conduct, no less improper for Christians to hear, than for a Christian to do.

There can be nothing more odious in the light of revelation, than that of swearing by the throne of God; and yet our dramatist represents him as belching

belching out an oath in these words, *By heaven.* If I had not promised to make no remarks on Glenalvon's character, I would have here taken notice of a peculiar kind of oath our unwary poet puts in his mouth, not only making him swear in the same strain with Lord Randolph, as now mentioned; but making him swear *by the most blessed cross.* In this one would be tempted to think, the dramatist was ambitious of becoming the author of a new oath, as well as a new tragedy. And in proportion as this species of swearing shall prevail, none will deny him the honour he deserves in it.

The only other observation I shall make with respect to Lord Randolph in the poem, is his being represented as uttering words expressive of blasphemy, against the disposal of divine providence. To Douglas, concerning the hermit, he says,

*There is a destiny in this strange world,
Which oft decrees an undeserved doom.*

Does not the poet here charge infinite perfection with iniquity? Does he not hereby cause the operations of the Lord's hand to be continually blasphemed on the stage? Nor can one help, at least, fearing, that nothing could have tempted the unhappy author of this poem to put these words in that person's mouth, on an occasion when he intended to represent him in a serious mood, if his own wretched principles respecting the divine government of the world had not led him to it.

The most tolerable character through the whole drama, is that of Anna, Lady Randolph's handmaid: in which, upon the principles of Christianity, there is more true temper, government of passions, and morality, than in all the other characters taken

taken together. Though, even in her case, the poet blunders extremely, at least as a Christian, if he pretends to be such, in putting scripture-phrases in her mouth, to be uttered with irreverence upon the stage. In a real character, what she is supposed to say in the language of inspiration, would be truly beautiful and noble; but in an imaginary one, it is treating the sacred text with a contempt too obvious to need illustration.

But what I have particularly in view is the character of his heroine Lady Randolph herself: in which are such a number and variety of the most unscriptural principles and practices, such a composition of errors and wickedness, that instead of becoming the favourite of unwary spectators, it is beyond measure amazing she does not fill them with horror and contempt. Without pretending, having already too far exceeded the reasonable bounds of a letter, to cull out every passage in the poem respecting her that deserves to be treated with the highest detestation, I shall confine myself to a few, and, as I go along, show the wickedness, the desperate wickedness, of each.

I need not again put you in mind that it is in the balances of the sanctuary alone I am to weigh this character. To all who duly regard a divine revelation, that will have abundance of weight in determining their judgment; and with respect to others, their approbation or contempt will, to the Christian, appear as a very small thing.

1. First of all then, our poet represents his heroine as a gross dissembler; as pretending a lasting grief for the loss of one, while the death of another was the real cause.

My

My brother's timeless death, says she, I seem to mourn.

Though in particular cases truth may be concealed; yet where others must suffer from such disguise, no prudence, or whatever else you please to call it, can justify the conduct. But her dissimulation, with regard to the real source of her affliction, necessarily affected the happiness of her husband; who, upon such discovery, might have avoided the disagreeable snare of marrying one alienated from him in her affections. It is not denied that the dramatist endeavours to wipe off this slur from her character, by representing her as putting Lord Randolph in mind that she told him, previous to their unhappy marriage, though she gave him her hand, she could not give him her affection. At the same time it is evident to demonstration, that her dissembling the truth made his Lordship willing to hope her grief through time would subside, and of consequence she would exercise such regards for him as were necessary to render him happy in a married capacity: whereas had she, with the integrity and courage of a Christian, pulled off the mask, the Baron would at least have had an opportunity of judging fairly for himself, and in the event she would never have been answerable for the consequences of his unhappiness through her dejection. How differing from, how opposite unto, the doctrines of revelation this part of Lady Randolph's character! *Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour*, says the prophet. *Putting away lying*, says the apostle, *speake every man truth with his neighbour*. And the psalmist, under the same divine influence, assures us, a man speaking the truth in his heart is no less essential to the Christian character than walking uprightly and working righteousness.

2. She

2. She is represented, in the drama, as charging God foolishly, in these words :

Mighty God!

What had I done to merit such affliction?

The impious exclamation with which that question begins, shall be considered, with other embellishments of the same nature, in a place by themselves. With respect to the sentiment there expressed, few words are necessary to prove how wicked, heaven-daring, and absurd at first sight it must be. Putting it in the form of a question, implies the strongest affirmation, that she had never deserved such affliction as Providence had been pleased to put into her lot, or permit her to be exercised with; and, by necessary consequence, that in her present trial God had acted a very unequal, unjust, and cruel part toward her.

In this she seems quite lost to all suitable apprehensions of the just demerit of iniquity, and of the righteous government exercised by Jehovah respecting his creatures; both so clearly represented in the holy oracles, that he who runs may read.

As to the first of these, unless our poet will suppose her to have been capable of pleading absolute innocence, legal perfection in the sight of God; it is plain from the holy scriptures, that sin, in any view, is contrary to the divine image and law; merits, justly merits, not only what afflictions the sinner is capable of at present, but all the misery in soul and body he shall be capable of through eternity itself. To this purpose it is written, "Cursed is every one that continueth not *in all* things which are written in the book of the law to do them. The wages of sin is death. Death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

D

And

And as to the second of these, nothing is more fully taught in the sacred page, there is nothing on which inspired writers insist more, than the vindication of the divine character, and the consistency between his whole procedure and the highest imaginable perfection of nature. Though numberless passages might be brought in to bear witness for God, I shall, by quoting a single text, prove his righteousness and equity in visiting sinners with afflicting dispensations, and prove it the same way by which the lady in the drama makes an insinuation so repugnant to it; namely, in the way of question, put by one whose praise has been and will continue in all the churches; and put in way of address *also* to heaven, though stripped of the haughty exclamation introducing Lady Randolph's complaint, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?* In which Abraham strongly affirms the absolute infallible certainty of it as a maxim in the system of revelation, That God in all his procedure acts according to what is right, and just, and equal. Besides, under afflictions of the most severe and complicated nature, we find persons of a character for morality and religion vastly superior to all the characters in this drama together, the poet himself being judge, expressing themselves in terms as opposite to those in which Lady Randolph opens her daring lips, as east is from west. *Wherefore*, says true virtue in distress, *doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?* which can have no meaning at all, if it is not that sinners under affliction meet with nothing from the hand of God which they do not richly deserve.

3. This heroine, in the drama, is represented as uttering the most horrid blasphemy against the purposes

poses of God; with his execution of them, in these words.

*Nor has despiteful fate permitted me
The comfort of a solitary sorrow.*

There is something, Sir, so intolerable, and, for any thing I have had access to see, so peculiar, quite peculiar, and new, in this reflection against Jehovah, the God of truth, in whom there is no iniquity, that I question if any thing can bear a nearer resemblance to the blasphemy of devils and damned spirits in the pit of wrath. Nor can I doubt of the dramatist's having in this, as in different other particulars through the poem, been inspired by temptation from below.

The poet has left his reader no room to doubt, that by *fate* here we must understand that plan of procedure in the kingdom of providence laid down by infinite wisdom to be invariably observed in all his dealings with his creatures. But what tongue can fully express the dreadful disdain, the hellish contempt thrown out against that plan, with its glorious author, in the epithet of a *despiteful* fate? Is it possible to notice this without horror? can it be read, can it be acted or heard, without the awful sensations of dread, fear, and terror? It conveys, how far words will be allowed to convey sentiments, the notion of a malicious, malignant, unreasonable, splenetic, monstrous fate or dispensation; and, of consequence, represents the author of such fate or providence as altogether of a piece with his works and dispensations. I dare say this is a stroke of poetic eloquence no where to be equalled out of hell. To say the best of it, it is a "thinking that God is altogether such an one as themselves;" an ascribing of weakness and passion to him; and thence a direct robbing him

of that perfection of nature, in which he so much glories, and which is so conspicuous through all his words and works.

4. In the drama Lady Randolph is represented as setting limits to the holy One of Israel, and proudly putting bounds to omnipotence itself, in these words,

*One only cure can heav'n itself bestow,
A grave —*

as if Jehovah was incapable of providing other creature-comforts to make up the room of such as were lost; or of allowing and commanding such communications of the Holy Ghost to the soul, as should not only make outward losses easy and bearable, but actually fill the person, in the want of every creature-enjoyment, with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Such an accursed sentiment must tend, if it has any tendency at all, to drive the afflicted from using the means of encouragement and relief proposed by the Lord in the word, and to make forlorn souls seek an outgate by means that are unlawful and iniquous. If a grave is the only possible outgate from unbearable tribulation, why would miserable creatures be so much to blame, as they doubtless are, in being accessory to, instrumental of their own death? But a grave is by no means heaven's utmost in this regard. Promises, numberless promises, and words of grace, bear witness for God, that, in the exercise of faith, "beauty may be had instead of ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garments of praise for the spirit of heaviness." Upon scripture-principles, widows themselves may rejoice in the Lord as their everlasting husband, and "obtain a
" name

" name and a place better than that even of sons or daughters."

Besides, Sir, in a person of the impious character under consideration, the prospect of relief from trouble by a grave, is presumptuous and vain. Death, to such unholy souls, is so far from being an end of tribulation, that it is only the beginning of sorrows. Nor is it an unusual occurrence in the world, to find persons long and hope for death in an unprepared state, as in which they expect an outgate from pain and anguish: whereas, their hopes, once attained, only finish their wo, crown their misery, and put the capstone upon their despair. The unbelieving irregenerate part of mankind needed, by no means needed, the poet's unwary hint on this subject to strengthen and rivet a delusive principle so universal, and at the same time so fatal already.

A grave! said she. True indeed, like sheep are the wicked laid down there, and in that land of forgetfulness the mortal part of their frame rests from toil, fatigue, and travel. But in what capacity do they lie in the bed of silence? Only as prisoners, reserved to the judgment of the great day; while their souls, until that awful period, so far from rest and relief, are wrapped up in winding-sheets of wrath, chained up in the prison, the dismal prison of utter darkness. And is this the cure of present dejection and trouble taught the wicked and profane in this drama? Is this the only balm our poet knows to pour into the wounded and distressed mind of the unconverted sinner? Can the entertainments of the stage afford no higher consolation? Then, surely, he that loveth the doctrine taught by this representation, "wrongeth his own soul, and loveth death." O my soul come not thou into their assembly!

5. Lady

5. Lady Randolph, through the poem, is represented as profaning, grossly profaning, the names, titles, works, and perfections of the ever-blessed God, in a variety of exclamations, as expressed by the dramatist in these words,

Mighty God! — O God of heaven! — Eternal Providence! — O Sovereign Mercy!

Such exclamations, where used in real characters, are often, mostly, if not always, an irreverent, unholy, unnecessary use of the name of God; and therefore subject the persons thus guilty to the condemnation inseparable from the breach of the third commandment. But where used in imaginary characters, used in places of diversion, used by persons not at all in the circumstances which are supposed to apologize for them, and used with a view to amuse and entertain the promiscuous croud; the abuse is so evident, the impiety so glaring, that to suppose an illustration of it necessary, would, I imagine, be offering an insult to common sense and reason themselves, though revelation was entirely laid aside. An exclamation of that kind was, without contradiction, denominated plain and actual swearing in the face of a late general assembly of this church, *anno 1753*; and the Noble person by whom it was made, gave such evidence of his conviction, that it was an abuse of the name of God, by his after silence, as rendered further notice of the crime by that venerable body less necessary. And if a single such expression, by one in the real warmth of argument and zeal, was, in such a place, and in the presence of such a court, allowed to imply a profanation of the name of God; how much more must such variety of them, used without any necessity of that sort, merit the same designation? The narrowest acquaintance with the gay world,

world, will at once convince how taking and agreeable every shew, of excuse for this practice is. And if the dramatist, by this performance, shall contribute in any degree to keep the profane in countenance, doubtless he shall have his reward. It is enough, in way of proof that such exclamations are impious and sinful, to say, in the language of immediate inspiration, that *the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain*; and in the language of our divine Saviour, that *whatsoever is more than yea and nay, cometh of evil*.

6. Lady Randolph, in the drama, is represented by the poet as addressing herself immediately to Heaven in the solemn exercise of prayer. It is neither the matter nor manner of that prayer I am now to criticise upon, though perhaps in both these respects it might admit of it; but the dreadful circumstance in it, to me, is the abuse of that ordinance, by the mock representation of it upon the stage.

There are three things particularly in prayer, by which the wickedness and absurdity of representing it upon the stage will appear.

1st. The worshipper, or person praying, is one affected with a sense of need, and thence led to apply, humbly to apply, for the supply of it: but, in the representation of this tragedy, the supposed worshipper is not. The actresses can only pretend to worship, while the hearers must be sensible of the hypocrisy, the premeditated hypocrisy and disguise of the whole. What does the poet in such a case, but lay a temptation in the way of a lewd, ignorant, silly soul to hypocrisy, and, by so doing, expose herself to the final fate of hypocrites and unbelievers? Tho' the unhappy wretch, induced by gain to profane that
piece

piece of divine worship, is by no means guiltless; sure the still more wretched dramatist brings the blood of such soul upon his own head.

2dly, In prayer, the petitions offered up are such as a present sense of need, personal or relational, dictate and inspire; whereas, in the prayer under view, the person for whom it is supposed to be offered up, does not exist, is now no more. And therefore in such petitions there is nothing true, nothing real, the whole is falsehood, fiction, and chimaera. Than which can there be any thing more daring, monstrous, and profane? But what crowns the impiety,

3dly, In prayer, an immediate respect is, by the worshipper, to be had unto God Redeemer, the alone object of prayer. He is immediately addressed, and particularly beseeched. What then does the actress in this case? Because she appears in masquerade before men, does she pretend to stand in disguise before the throne of the august Majesty of heaven and earth? Is she so hardy, as offer an immediate insult to the object of prayer, representing an absent or imaginary character? Does she venture to rush against the thick bosses of Jehovah's buckler, in pretending to ask what she does not, cannot need, or desire? Yes, Sir; in this modern representation nothing less is evidently implied.

By this part of the drama, the solemn duty of prayer is turned into such insufferable ridicule, that it quite surprises me how any sensible, not to say serious hearer, is able to put up with it. What a miracle of divine patience, that such guilt is not accompanied with terrible things in righteousness! I shall only observe, in the

Last place, That our poet gives the finishing touches

touches to Lady Randolph's character, when, in the drama, she is represented as guilty of suicide or self-murder, in these words:

*And headlong down——
—— she plung'd herself
Into the empty air.*

This is a species of immorality so gross, so dangerous, and at the same time so irreparable, that I am quite at a loss for words to express the guilt and aggravation of it. Life, of all others, is the most valuable talent intrusted with the rational creature; and instead of preserving and improving it for the glory of God the giver, at once to squander and sacrifice it to the gratification of pride or passion, must of consequence be a sin of the deepest hue, a crime of the grossest nature. It argues the want of patience, resignation, and fortitude, as to present trials; and the want of due reflection and consideration, as to the just demerit and consequence of such iniquity. This procedure is in direct contradiction to his divine authority, who says, *Thou shalt not kill*; and is justified by no precedent recorded in scripture, unless the practice of Ahithophel in the Jewish, and Judas in the Christian church, are examples to be copied after.

THESE, dear Sir, are a few short observations, in answer to your second question. My present circumstances forbid such a particular discussion of them as the cause they regard justly merits. Nor will they permit my adding such reflections upon the subject as you might naturally expect.

It is not altogether without concern, that I have noticed the countenance and approbation with which this tragedy, and the supposed poet, have universal-

ly met. Those who are lovers of the stage, and its entertainments, are naturally led from that principle, to grasp at every shew of excuse for their favourite pastime; and the common report of a minister's being the author of *Douglas*, contributes not a little to confirm such of the rightness of the practice, who might previously have hung in suspense; and to give others the greater boldness in arguing for the propriety and usefulness of the stage, who formerly, in point of argument, had given up with the cause as insupportable and lost. Others, again, from their love of literature and composition, are led to celebrate this performance as a finished poem in the dramatic way; without allowing themselves to advert to the snake, the dangerous snake, in the grass; while others of delicate passions, moved with the tragical part of the drama, suspect no danger, where such noble feelings are produced. If we consider what a vast part of mankind are comprehended under these different classes, the surprise that this tragedy should have been so warmly received, in part ceases; especially if we add the influence that connections have upon the conduct of most men. One approves, in imitation of another; another approves, because he thinks so much due to the opinion, the favourite opinion, of particular persons; while another does it, because prejudiced in favour of the dramatist and his supporters, or prejudiced against such as set themselves to weaken the interest of the stage amongst us. But,

Dear Sir, might I venture on the freedom, I would willingly insist on your giving no encouragement to the representations of the stage in general, nor to this modern tragedy in particular. Though what I have already said may be considered as so many

ny arguments for your indulging me in this request, ambitious of prevailing with you, I would beg leave still to suggest a few things to your serious consideration on this subject.

1st, That *time* is a talent of inestimable value, and the improvement of it of unquestionable importance to our present usefulness, and everlasting tranquillity. And every endeavour to murder and kill time, is only reaching so many wounds to the conscience; which, if not cured in the way of the gospel, will break out, and bleed afresh, at a period when thousands of worlds would be given for inward peace; but, though at a person's disposal, given in vain. — Say, what the thoughtless votaries of the stage would give, when entered the lists with the king of terrors, for one of those many precious hours they have sinfully lost, by their attendance on theatrical representations. In what light will the pleasure they once had in such a box, pit, or gallery, during such a dramatical exhibition; in what light will it appear, when confined as prisoners on a bed of languishing, and reserved as criminals to the pit of wrath? Though your passing an hour at a time in the playhouse, should not eventually have this piercing influence on your own soul at the end of the days; yet let me obtest you, as you would not, directly or indirectly, contribute toward the ruin of others, incapable of checking their pursuit of vanity, to abandon such society and entertainment.

2^{dly}, Consider how far the generation has already swerved from the original purity and simplicity of the gospel. What thoughtlessness, what contempt of divine things, what neglect of the great salvation, what disregard to the means of grace, what lustings after pleasures, sinful pleasures, and glorying in that

which is their shame, prevail in the world, and in that part of it called *Christian*? What weakness, ignorance, formality, prejudice, unfruitfulness, and conformity to the world, have place amongst those of the soberest, most religious character? What error, division, emulation, and universal defection, are the reproach of the churches themselves? And is it a time to give way to idle and dangerous amusements, when a noble stand, to stop such impetuous current of vice and irreligion, is called for?

godly, Consider, that countenancing the late tragedy, as supposed to have been writ and published by a minister of the gospel, tends to lessen and weaken the authority of the sacred character, so much, and, alas! so justly, despised and undervalued already. The time was, when the holiness of ministers procured them veneration and regard from men of the most dissolute characters, and immoral conversations; whereas now, that many of them to a visible degree, most of them in a real manner, almost all of them, in less or more, have degenerated from that strictness, solemnity, and circumspection, in which their worthy predecessors so eminently shone; their authority and influence have, in the same proportion, sunk and given way. Nor has any thing, for a century back, contributed more to eradicate any remainders of that commendable regard to the ministerial character and function, than the late dramatical performance. As you would not therefore wish to have any hand in the completion of such an infamous work; — would not encourage those of the sacred character who are frothy and unstayed, in their growing retreat toward the side of immorality and ungodliness; — would not strengthen the hands of the avowed enemies of religion, who, by caressing her pretended

pretended friends, seek to wound her, but wound her fatally under the fifth rib; — would not still more discourage the few of that character yet amongst us, who have it at heart to be found faithful; — and as you would not have a hand in entailing defection and destruction upon the generations to come: — my dear Sir, be intreated to pour that contempt upon this modern representation, which, in these circumstances, it justly deserves.

Can you see the repeated intimation of that entertainment in our weekly journals and courants, after the strongest remonstrances against it, both from the pulpit and the press, without hearing, or thinking you hear these dreadful sounds, issuing from the mouths of the wicked and profane, *Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us?* And can I allow myself to think you will, by your attendance on the stage, help such heady and heedless souls to accomplish at once their own ruin, and the ruin of posterity? No, Sir; *I am persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though I thus speak.* There is a

4th thing I would suggest to your consideration, that, in the event of its appearing that a minister of this church was the author and publisher of the late tragedy, the offence or satisfaction it gives may have its own influence upon the conduct of his superiors, in their procedure respecting him. Not that I imagine the sentiments of the populace either are or should be their rule of conduct in a judicative capacity; only that as particular members may view that practice rather as inexpedient than unlawful, the reception with which the performance meets, cannot fail of letting them know, in a great measure, in how far it is so or not; and thence of influencing their

their judgments, respecting the degree of censure to be inflicted against their offending brother. And the offence being unprecedented in this church and land, it must be of the greater importance to the future growth or decay of such productions, how the present author of the drama is treated by those to whom, for his conduct, he is immediately answerable. But, upon this principle, you will at once see, that, on the supposition of the practice being unworthy the sacred character, and the poem itself being impious and profane, which is, by this time, I imagine, evident, countenancing the tragedy, by your attending the representation of it, is, in so far, endeavouring to screen the delinquent from censure, and to bring the discipline of the church under the highest contempt. How could you bear the reflection, in the event of his absolution, that, by your countenancing the stage, you contributed in any degree towards it? May I therefore hope, that whatever others do, you shall be able, in this regard, to wash your hands in innocence. Besides the advantage that must necessarily result from it to yourself, your daring to be unfashionable at present, will give singular pleasure to,

S I R,

Your most humble servant,

1757.

A. B.



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